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TAGS: PGOV PREL ASEC IV

SUBJECT: COTE D'IVOIRE: NO VISIBLE PROGRESS IN OUAGADOUGOU
"DIRECT DIALOGUE" BETWEEN GBAGBO AND SORO

REF: ABIDJAN 141

Classified By: POL/ECON Jim Wojtasiewicz, reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) Summary. There are no signs of significant progress in the Gbagbo-proposed "direct talks" with rebel New Forces (FN) leader Soro that President Compaore of Burkina Faso is trying to mediate. There has been no face-to-face meeting between the two principals and even their representatives are communicating largely through Burkina Faso mediators. Almost no information is leaking out publicly, but sources close to the talks tell us that a total impasse remains over the issue of identification, though on the other hand

military-to-military talks are reportedly going well. A rift may be emerging within one of the two main opposition parties that could have important implications both for the course of these negotiations and for President Gbagbo's reelection prospects. The local press speculated that Gbagbo was trying to woo Soro by offering the position of Prime Minister, but now believes Soro rejected the offer. French Cooperation Minister Girardin was in Ouagadougou February 28, reportedly hoping to press the Ivoirians to sign an agreement before the March 2 International Working Group (IWG) meeting.

A sudden breakthrough cannot be ruled out, but we continue to believe the two sides are too far apart on identification.

We also continue to doubt whether any agreement the Ivoirians might sign will really be fully implemented. Girardin's visit to Ouagadougou is a clumsy move that could backfire. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Almost four weeks after President Gbagbo's proposed "direct dialogue" was launched in Ouagadougou between his representatives and those of the rebel New Forces (FN) (reftel), there are few signs of progress. Almost no information has leaked out in the press about the state of play in the negotiations. The Burkina Faso mediators have reportedly created a "pre-accord" -- a document synthesizing the proposals made by each of the two sides, but nothing has leaked out about its contents.

¶3. (C) Indeed, the talks could hardly be called "direct." There has still been no face-to-face meeting between Gbagbo and FN leader Soro. Hrair Belian, deputy to UN High Representative for Elections (HRE) Gerard Stoudmann, told us February 21 that even Gbagbo and Soro's lieutenants, Presidential Spokesman Desire Tagro and FN Deputy Secretary General Dacouri are not meeting face-to-face. Rather, each side presents its proposals through the Burkina Faso mediators, who shuttle between them. Belian told us there has been no progress whatsoever on the key issue of identification. He said that at one point Tagro presented a compromise under which those on the 2000 electoral list would be considered already identified and those not on the list would have the opportunity to do so under the current identification procedures (procedures which so far the FN have steadfastly rejected). However, Belian said Tagro later rejected his own proposal. (Some local papers are reporting

that this proposal came not from the Gbagbo camp but from one of the two principal opposition leaders, former President Bedie or former Prime Minister Ouattara.) Belian did say that the military-to-military talks about integrating the two armies are proceeding well.

¶4. (C) Belian also told us that Burkina Faso President Compaore is closely following these talks, is personally engaged, and has shown an impressively detailed understanding of the underlying issues.

¶5. (C) Meanwhile, back in Abidjan, Ouattara's RDR (Rally of Republicans) party is growing increasingly concerned about a power struggle within Bedie's PDCI (Democratic Party of Cote d'Ivoire). Former PDCI members now aligned with Gbagbo's FPI (Ivoirian Popular Front), led by Laurent Fologo, one of Gbagbo's closest associates, are joining forces with anti-Bedie elements within the party, led by former Interior Minister Emile Constant Bombe. Bedie was apparently concerned enough about the strength of this opposition that he had his Secretary General Djedje Mady announce this week that PDCI would not hold a convention to formally select its 2007 candidate for president. The party did hold such a convention to select Bedie in 2005, and they were planning another such convention this year but now it is canceled. Representatives of both the Fologo faction and the Bombe faction promptly denounced this move.

¶6. (C) What the RDR is concerned about is that if this dissident group succeeds in wresting control of the party from Bedie, they would likely form an electoral alliance with the FPI. It should be recalled that it was Bedie himself who started the virulently anti-Northern (and anti-Ouattara) "Ivoirite" campaign in the late 1990s, which the FPI has now

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embraced as its own. Such a political realignment could help Gbagbo in two ways. One, it could help him try to push the identification issue out of the picture. The FPI contends that most of the undocumented people are foreigners from the North seeking to fraudulently obtain Ivoirian citizenship, and the Bombe faction in the PDCI might well agree. As Interior Minister under Bedie in the late 1990s, Bombe was one of the most vocal proponents of "Ivoirite." Second the support of even part of the PDCI electorate could improve Gbagbo's chances of winning the elections. Right now, if all of the opposition party electorates unite behind a single candidate, Gbagbo would have little chance of winning.

¶7. (C) Much of the speculation in the local press about the Ouagadougou talks has centered on power-sharing -- that Gbagbo is trying to persuade Soro to take the post of Prime Minister, or even Vice President. There were some reports that in exchange Gbagbo wanted Soro's agreement that Gbagbo would stay in power another two full years. When Ouattara led an RDR/PDCI delegation to Ouagadougou last week, the pro-Gbagbo press scoffed that they only wanted to make sure they got their share of the spoils. The pro-opposition press countered that, rather, Ouattara wanted to make sure Soro remained focused on the issue of identification, and did not get sidetracked by talk about power-sharing. In any case, most recently the press seems to have become convinced that Soro has rejected any offer of the post of Prime Minister.

¶8. (C) While the Burkina Faso mediators are reportedly energetic and closely engaged, the Ivoirians seem to be taking a leisurely approach, with no sense of urgency even though as every day goes by the chances of holding elections this year grow slimmer. This week the French brought their own energies to bear, as Cooperation Minister Girardin visited Ouagadougou February 28, on her way to Abidjan for the March 2 IWG meeting. A UK diplomat told us that the French were determined to press the Ivoirians into signing an agreement before the IWG.

¶9. (C) Comment. A sudden breakthrough cannot be ruled out,

though we continue to believe that identification is too important to both sides for either of them to concede enough to make a deal. However, as we have said before, there are many headstones in the graveyard of failed Ivoirian peace agreements. Even if they do sign something, and especially if they do so under French or African coercion, the past suggests we should not be too optimistic that they will keep to it. Girardin's visit to Ouagadougou is a rather clumsy move that could well backfire and only further complicate these negotiations. End Comment.

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